

## Britain & Ireland's Walling Treasures: The Pinnacle Awards 1

When I first started thinking about “Walling Treasures” I thought that perhaps there ought to be some place for the best contemporary stonework, after all this will form part of our future heritage. This has opened a whole can of worms. The most impressive (or perhaps just most well known) modern works tend to be some form of art installation, maybe a garden or two, sometimes a renovation of something much older. The latter presents fewer conundrums heritage is in many respects all about time lines, is any 500 year old piece of stonework now the same as it was when first built? In that respect it makes little difference – at least within the scope of walling treasures – whether or not the ‘change’ took place last week or last century, as long as it is of sufficient quality - whatever that might be. Completely new works raise more questions. Will they stand the test of time, indeed how relevant are they? Does it matter if they are knocked down after a few years, are they that much less relevant than a set of cantilevered steps demolished after 150 years? (see *Waller and Dyker*, Summer 2009).

Shuffling these doubts off to one side for the time being, if contemporary work is to be included then the DSWA's Pinnacle Award scheme seems as good a place as any to start, it exists after all to recognise the “*most outstanding projects incorporating the very best of craftsmanship, innovative use of design and inspirational use of stone*”. There are two levels of award – certificates of merit and full awards. For the time being walling treasures will confine itself to the full awards and this time we'll have a look at the first four...

The first pinnacle award was made in 1994 for a new “Blackhouse” designed by Scott Bennett a structural engineer and current owner, and built by Neil Rippingale (now of the Kentucky Conservancy) at Borve/Scarista on Harris (that is the southern part of the Outer Hebridean Isle of Lewis). Blackhouses in general, and Neil's in particular, were the subject of a detailed article in “Stonechat 14” downloadable from the North Wales Branch section of DSWA website or by typing [www.dswa.org.uk/UserFiles/File/14%20Winter%2008.pdf](http://www.dswa.org.uk/UserFiles/File/14%20Winter%2008.pdf) into your browser. It is currently self-catering holiday accommodation ([www.borvemor.zetnet.co.uk/blackhouse.html](http://www.borvemor.zetnet.co.uk/blackhouse.html))



“Blackhouses” were essentially long thin (one room wide) crofters’ cottages with a door, but no windows or chimneys (smoke from fires just worked its way out of the thatch) – both factors probably apocryphal explanations of the origin of the name ‘black’. Neil's blackhouse, thought to be the only new one built in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, deviated from the norm in that it has windows and a chimney as it had to comply with modern building regulations. These also insisted that the four feet thick walls contained either Tyvec (more usually found under roofing slates) or visqueen (plastic underfloor dpc) rather than the more traditional peat (which would absorb moisture helping keep the inside dry and more air tight – or at least breeze proof). Most, but by no means all, blackhouses are “hip ended” that is have rounded corners possibly to help with wind proofing, but also likely due to a lack of suitable quoins. Neil explains “the stone is so damned hard to dress into right angles, hence whatever little right angled stone [is used] for doors and windows”.

The second pinnacle award also went ‘north of the border’. The award simply reads “Garden Features, Portrack House, Dumfries 1995” which hides the fact that it is part of Dr Charles Jencks internationally famous post modern ‘garden of cosmic speculation’. Designed by Dr Jencks



and built by Hugh Drysdale part of the work is a pair of interlocking red sandstone urns one to hold peat, the other sand. These were built

entirely by eye from very basic sketches provided by Dr Jencks. Hugh describes the building of Tweedledum and Tweedledee (as Dr Jencks christened them) as a very challenging, but highly enjoyable project.

The challenge also included a ha-ha, known as the wave wall, over 150m in length and around 2m high. Waveforms are an integral part of this garden and the ha-ha is part of a soliton wave curving along its length and twisting through its height. Yes part of length of the wall batters in as normal, and part batters out so the top overhangs the base. The stone work also slopes with distinct bands of sandstone apparently piercing the ground. This wall can be seen at <http://www.dswa.org.uk/media/picture/number192.asp?st=portrack>.

A further ‘dry stone’ element at Portrack is the Chinese Dragon wall. Part of a walled garden the top of the wall forms a switchback undulating to over 10 feet in height in places. The wall incorporates three doorways incorporating intricately patterned stonework. However

the lack of batter and height means most of these walls and features had a mortar core disqualifying them from the pinnacle award and I suppose it from walling treasures...maybe. More worms.

In order to understand the garden you need to read Dr Jencks, deep and complex, beautifully illustrated book "*The Garden of Cosmic Speculation*." To appreciate it fully it is open to the public one day a year, this year May 2<sup>nd</sup> from 12pm. After which I hope to have more photos on <http://mywebtiscali.co.uk/wallingwonderland>.

A Scottish theme seemed to be developing with the awards as the next was awarded to "Lothian Landscape Sculptures" in 1998. Public artist David Wilson ([www.dfwilson.co.uk](http://www.dfwilson.co.uk)) received a phone call asking him if he was interested in a work on "some roundabout near Edinburgh Airport" and explains "I was expecting maybe a small mini roundabout and was blown over when I realised the true scale of the project." This involved designing a series of wall features in combination with soft landscaping to create an interesting and attractive environment on what is one of the main gateways into Scotland.

Working closely with Keith Horner of Landscape architects Turnbull Jeffries the design was developed for around 400 metres of wall on the two roundabouts either side of a flyover, and on the main approaches to the interchange. Forming a series of 'star/flower' shaped areas, David explains that "conceptually it was hoped that with the use of traditional materials and plants the landscape would suggest to the viewer a feeling of 'Scottishness'."



The retaining walls built by David himself and Stuart Amos, incorporate changing patterns of stonework to add interest and emphasise the feeling of movement around the site. Centrally within the bays of the walls the coursing becomes what is perhaps best described as a random 'herringbone' pattern. This pattern particularly interested me

as I've not encountered it elsewhere in Britain, the nearest comparable I can think of being a less formal Mallorcan pattern - Perhaps it's unique in Britain unless you know better...

As a result of the Airport roundabouts a further commission followed for a series of roundabouts in Livingston, the most spectacular being at Newpark.

The impressive humps incorporate copper inserts which are attached to a framework around which the hollow

humps were built. More wallers were involved this time David supplemented by amongst others Neil Rippingale, Ewan Allinson, and Donald McIntyre.



The fourth award at last saw an English site, Lord McLaurin's (of Tesco and TCCB fame) garden at Longdene Hertfordshire. The Scottish dominance of early pinnacle awards was not entirely absent as the waller was previous recipient Hugh Drysdale. Designed by Ian Kitson ([www.iankitson.com](http://www.iankitson.com)) the work essentially forms a sunken garden in the shape of a crescent immediately outside the house, the original ground level having sloped around 4m down from the boundary 45m or so away formed a slope precluding much of a view. 2m high at the back the wall is dry cladding of blockwork (used to aid precision in layout and reduce the overall thickness required) and has a split leading to a recessed 'hidden' water feature. Ian knew of Jencks work at Portrack and Hugh's part in it and so approached him for this project. Initially reluctant to undertake the project Hugh was eventually lured south following meeting complete with 1:1 layout chalk drawings.

The east of England is not renowned for its stone quarries and Hugh brought 100 tonnes of his local stone with him. Red sandstone, whinstone and granite, blues and greys and even some yellow yorkstone, to produce a speckled coloured wall.

The garden is full of colourful perennials which mask the stonework for long periods, but this is all part of a plan, the walls form a key ingredient exposed as the seasons change. Ian says that the garden's design stands and falls on the statement the stone makes and the overall effect lifts the stonework far beyond the prosaic and practical.



Giving a feel for garden projects in one or two photos is night on impossible, there is however a photo album in the DSWA website picture gallery see <http://www.dswa.org.uk/media/list.asp?field=groups&crit=23>, covering Longdene.

To finish with a few more worms. As deserving as the Blackhouse in the context of walling treasures does it stand out more than any existing ones, if we include it must we include blackhouses per se? If pinnacle gardens

are included then should we be scouring the land for all that is dry stone within that great landscape gardening age, the Victorian era. If we include Newhaven, then what about the Portrack dragon wall?

Thanks to Neil, Hugh, David, Ian for their help in preparing his article. Blackhouse photo courtesy Neil Rippingale, Edinburgh roundabouts courtesy David Wilson, Urns & Longdene DSWA library

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